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LITERATURE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN.

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THE QUALITIES WHICH MAKE STORYBOOKS AND PICTURE BOOKS APPEALING TO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN AND THOSE WHICH HELP THEM UNDERSTAND AND MASTER THE USES OF LANGUAGE ARE DISCUSSED BRIEFLY. DIFFERENT TYPES OF BOOKS THAT APPEAL TO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN ARE PRESENTED--BOOKS THAT ENCOURAGE THE HEALTHY EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS, BOOKS THAT ENABLE THEM TO PARTICIPATE, BOOKS THAT PRESENT THE CONFLICTS AND FEELINGS CHILDREN EXPERIENCE AS THEY GROW, BOOKS THAT CONFIRM FOR THEM DAILY EXPERIENCES AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS, AND BOOKS LOVED BY YOUNG CHILDREN FROM ALL SOCIOECONOMIC LEVELS. A SPECIAL TYPE OF BOOK IS ONE THE TEACHER MAKES FOR OR WITH HER CHILDREN ABOUT ONE OF THEIR OWN CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES. THIS EXPERIENCE HELPS CHILDREN UNDERSTAND WHAT A BOOK IS AND HOW IT IS MADE AND THAT WORDS RELATE TO PEOPLE AND EVENTS. BIBLIOGRAPHIC DATA FOR THE BOOKS DISCUSSED ARE PROVIDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CONFERENCE (HONOLULU, NOVEMBER 23-25, 1967). (NS)

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Literature for Young Children

Among the many books that three's and four's can enjoy today, Caps for Sale by Esphyr Slobodkina perhaps tops them all. Teachers can be almost sure that they will reach their children with this story; that the book will become a favorite sought out and asked for time and again throughout the year. If we look at the nature of its appeals we can learn almost all we need to know about the qualities of a good book for pre-school children.

In the first place, it has a story to tell -- a story full of suspense and emotion, built around a central dilemma. And it tells the story through such felicitous matching of pictures and text, and such appropriate rhythmical, repetitive language, that the child can soon master it for himself. Caps for Sale is a book he can sit down and "read" to himself and to others; and of course every time he hears the story, he is participating in the telling.

And what is there about the dilemma of this particular story that so engages our young three- or four-year-old? For him, the story concerns an angry peddler who cannot get his caps back from some impertinent monkeys who have absconded with them into a tree. He must shake his finger and stamp his feet and call out angrily before those caps finally come flying down out of the tree. That the child does not get the real point of the story -- that monkeys "ape" our actions -- is not important. What matters is that he can playfully and with impunity express a little strong, angry feeling as he impersonates both the monkeys and the peddler. Rare is the book for pre-school children that invites such healthy expression of emotion.

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Also, of course, the story offers a delightful array of colors in the grey, brown, blue, and red caps that the peddler carries in a pile on top of his own checked cap. The child can keep track of these caps throughout the story, seek them out in the pictures, and identify them; and finally, at the end of the story, he can have the satisfaction of seeing them restored to their rightful place on the top of the peddler's head, and in their rightful order -- a beautiful symbol of the resolution of dilemma.

Children's pleasure in Caps for Sale shows us that an appealing story is one of the best vehicles for involving young children in the oral practise that develops language competency. It is the story -- not the concept or information book -- that lends itself to spontaneous dramatization; it is the story that children want to tell aloud again and again, to themselves and others -- using their own words when they cannot remember the words in the book.

Also, when a teacher sees the general pleasure and participation of her whole group, as she reads Caps for Sale, she realizes how importantly this experience furthers the children's learning about the things they share in common. Here all can see the same greys, browns, blues, and reds in the pictures; all can feel exasperation along with the peddler. Through such a group experience each child can perceive a little more about himself in relation to others. A teacher is always looking for opportunities to guide her three-year-olds in this direction, for young children themselves are seeking ways to grow away from the exclusively personal toward the larger world they share with their peers.

There are other stories, of course, that children can become completely involved in, as they do in Caps for Sale. One can generally be sure that such stories either offer opportunities for strong expression of feeling or present themes that have urgency for the child, because they are the ones uppermost for him in his own stage of development.[1] The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown, for instance, is an enduring favorite of four-year-olds, not only because its lovely structured form delights them and enables them to participate and predict, but because it is a story of the familiar dependence-independence conflict. What will happen if one runs away from mother? This, in a nutshell, is the story's theme, a crucial one for the four-year-old. A similar theme, of course, is embedded in the beloved Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter -- too small a book to read to a whole group, but perfect for those times when a teacher can settle down with only one or two children.

The Quarreling Book by Charlotte Zolotow is another that intrigues many four-year-olds, even those who do not live in middle-class surroundings such as the book depicts. And why is it so appealing? The story tells of a mother whose cross feeling on one grey morning makes her cross to her son, who is then cross to his sister, who in turn berates her school friend, and so on. Like a row of dominoes, the characters affect each other. As in Caps for Sale, the story offers rich opportunity for expression of negative feeling. Possibly, also, it offers even for the very young child insights into some of the inner sources of anger.

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[1]See Virginia Stern, "The Story Reader as Teacher," Young Children, October 1966, 31-43.

The Curious George books by H. A. Rey are also top favorites, because of the presentation of dilemmas and feelings that are central and unavoidable for young children in the course of their growth. The little monkey, George, does things that he should not do, and gets into troubles. Will he get out of them? Yes! Will his keeper find him and rescue him and continue to care for him and love him? Yes!

Some teachers report that they prefer not to read to children as young as three the first Curious George book, in which one of the monkey's escapades lands him in jail. They feel that this jail episode can be both bewildering and disturbing to children who do not yet have clear ideas about who goes to jail and why, in real life.

Does this suggest that all disturbing or frightening situations should be avoided in books for three's or even for four's? Certainly the answer is not an unequivocable "yes." The Runaway Bunny arouses anxieties for certain children who are in the throes of conflicts about their growing urges for independence; but often these are the children who seek out the book, and in fact can be helped by the teacher toward clarification of their feelings as she encourages them to talk about the pictures or parts of the story that may disturb them.

Perhaps a teacher is wise, however, to avoid stories that stir up anxieties for certain of the children that are more than she as a teacher can help them resolve and handle. This includes the avoidance of fantasy stories with frightening pictures that young children may fail to perceive as fantasy. Certainly the line

between fact and fantasy is not clearly drawn for three's, or even all four's.

I would avoid, for instance, reading or showing to three's and four's Carol Fenner's Tigers in the Cellar. In this book, extremely realistic tigers can be seen creeping up the real stairs of a real house, toward a little girl who waits breathlessly and in fear at the top. To transpose these frightening realities into symbolic imaginings is beyond the ability of most very young children. This is not to say, of course, that the book might not be found highly reassuring and satisfying to many five's, six's, and seven's.

Likewise I would consider Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are unsuitable for three's; and if I found a four-year-old absorbed in it, I would ask myself, what is the quality of this absorption? Is the child perhaps bewildered? Do the pictures draw him back again and again because he is puzzled and compelled to figure out just what these monsters are, and how they got into this book? A number of verbatim records that have come to my attention do indeed indicate that children between the ages of four and six can be confused by both the story and pictures, and can fail to see the monsters as the imaginative symbols intended by the author. This does not preclude the possibility, of course, that even such children may be finding something in the feeling tone of the pictures to latch on to in ways that are meaningful and entirely personal to them. It behooves us adults to learn more about these connections children make for themselves. We are far too ignorant about the potentialities for emotional impact in the stories and pictures we offer children.

We are on surer ground when we watch our three's and four's poring over the informational books that picture for them the people, objects, and events in the outer world that is immediate to them. We know what a major task it is for young children to sort out the realities around them, identify similarities and differences, and organize their surroundings for themselves. They love the picture books that help them in this effort; that show them, for instance, the fire engines, trucks, cars, planes they find so fascinating and want to know more about. Indeed, they will practically fight over George Zaffo's Giant Nursery Book of Things That Go. They love, also, those stories that simply confirm for them their everyday home experiences. Hello Peter by Morrell Gipson is one of the most successful for the young three-year-old. The child listening to this story can see that another little child in a book lives through a day in the same way he does. And as all the children in the story group bring out their own associations, here again is a way for them to learn how much they share in common: they all eat cereal, go out to play -- and especially important, all try on their daddies' hats.

Certainly it is this talking, communicating, associating, that is one of the most important features of the story time. Here are salient opportunities for learning, as the children make their personal references, see relationships, and are guided by the teacher to think about what they see in the pictures and clarify what they know. Not long ago I watched a teacher of four's read Marie Hall Ets' beautiful Gilberto and the Wind, after an outdoor play period on a very windy day. She was hoping, of course, that the children might relive their own wind experience more vividly as they heard about what Gilberto did in the wind. It was wonderful to see one

child grasp a new concept when the teacher came to the picture of Gilberto trying to swing on the gate. The teacher read, "'Wind! Oh, Wind!' I say, and I go and climb on. 'Give me a ride!' But with me on it the gate is too heavy. Wind can't move it at all." Instantly the child saw the connection with something that had happened in the play yard. "Just like when we put bricks down on the mat, it couldn't blow." Relating two and two, seeing unexpected likenesses -- this, of course, is a creative thinking process, and one that can be encouraged by a teacher in many ways, as she reads aloud and stimulates the children to enter into discussion.

Young children are helped to another kind of satisfaction and mastery in those stories that give them an opportunity to affirm, in a playful way, their clear knowledge about <u>how things are</u>. A favorite of three's is <u>Do Baby Bears Sit In Chairs?</u> by Ethel and Leonard Kessler. When they shout together "No!" with the story reader, they are enjoying their firm grasp of the fact that baby bears do <u>not</u> "sit in chairs, comb their hair, wear underwear." Another book offering similar opportunities for the satisfying "Oh no!" chorus is <u>The Smart Little Kitty</u> by Louise Woodcock. I once watched a teacher reading this story to a group of disadvantaged pre-school children, many of them Spanish-speaking. She made of it a lively language and thinking exercise, as well as a delightful story experience. With her natural storytelling skill, she half-read, half-told the story, introducing many opportunities for the children to see the differences between Peter and the kitty, and to speak the sentences with her, and call out "No!" at the appropriate points.

Other stories loved by the so-called disadvantaged as well as by the advantaged -- as good stories should be -- are the books of Ezra Jack Keats, particularly The Snowy Day and Peter's Chair. These are outstanding not only for meaningful themes but for the fact that on their pages dark-skinned children are pictured in settings of great beauty. Another particularly valuable book for children from all socio-economic levels is Betty Miles' picture book about families, A House for Everyone. It is rare that all children in any pre-school group today come from families consisting solely of mother, father, and children living together. Frequently one of the parents is not in the picture, and for large segments of the population grandparents or other relatives are present. A House for Everyone accepts as "families" the two aunts who live with their plants, and the old gentleman who lives with his five cats, as well as more usual groupings such as grandmother, mother, and two children; and father, mother, and baby. The book not only offers acceptance; it helps the child listener classify and organize his concepts. Furthermore, its illustrations are clear, bright, and beautiful, as illustrations for three's and four's should be.

Finally, let me mention a new favorite that was intended as a book for older children to read to themselves -- Danny and the Dinosaur by Syd Hoff. What is the great appeal of this "easy reader" which indeed looks more like a reader than a picture book? It is funny, yes. And once again, it gives children that sense of superiority -- They know that a dinosaur can't really roam the streets and play with a little boy. But there is something else. The dinosaur's escapades are shot through with minor dilemmas: Will he get untangled from the telephone wires? Will he find something

big enough to hide behind? Dilemma and suspense -- these are of course at the heart of every story that deserves the name, and any book that can offer them to a young child in appropriate form is going to enthrall him. From the nonsense of Danny and the Dinosaur and the folk-tale simplicity and beauty of Caps for Sale, the child will move on as he grows a little older to the much-loved dilemmas of The Story About Ping by Marjorie Flack, Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel by Virginia Lee Burton, and The Poppy Seed Cakes by Margery Clark. And then, in his early school years, he will be ready to plunge into the far away and long ago, and lose himself in stories of past times, imaginary realms, and distant places -- including those outer reaches of space that are so intriguing to children today.

In closing, I want to mention one other type of book that is especially appropriate for three's and four's. This is the book the teacher makes for her children about one of their own classroom experiences. Whether or not she considers herself creatively gifted, she can write the story -- maybe about the visit of a pet rabbit to the room -- remembering the children's love of repetition, suspense, guessing. She can print the text by hand, draw simple illustrations, or construct them in collage, and then sew the pages into a bright cardboard binding. Crude, perhaps, but no matter. This is one of the books her children will love above others; it is their book; in its pages they can recognize themselves. And perhaps this story more than others will make clear to them what a "book" actually is -- that real people go into the making of it; that words relate

to events that happen; in short, that there can be a connection between themselves and the pages of pictures and little print letters that make up a book. This recognition results, too, when children construct their own simple books with the teacher's help, clipping together their pages of drawings and dictated stories.

It is through all the forms of story making and story participation that young children are helped to an understanding and mastery of the uses of language as a means for symbolic expression and communication. They are helped to clarification of feelings, discovery of self, and organization of ideas -- as well as to the emotional enlargement and keen delight that should be a part of their learning and living.

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